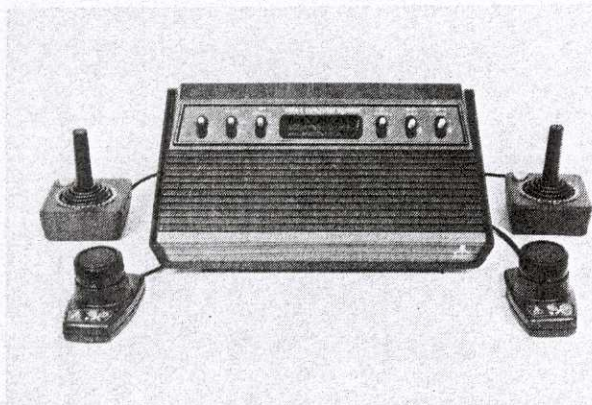


ARCADE ALLEY

A Critical Look At Video Cartridge Games & Programs



ATARI VIDEO COMPUTER SYSTEM

- Video Olympics
- Surround
- Home Run
- Basketball
- Breakout
- Air-Sea Battle

Once only the super-rich could hope to own a private electronic playground. Now arcade addicts everywhere can make this golden dream come true with programmable video games marketed by Atari, Magnavox, Fairchild, Bally, and others.

This column will attempt to treat these games from a fresh viewpoint, one that stresses playability rather than technology. Design superiority will be noted when it is present, since the complexity of the unit strongly affects game quality, but emphasis will be on the game cartridges themselves. We'll also try to point out which games are best for head-to-head competition, which are suitable for solitaire play, and which are apt to be of less interest to the devoted arcade game player.

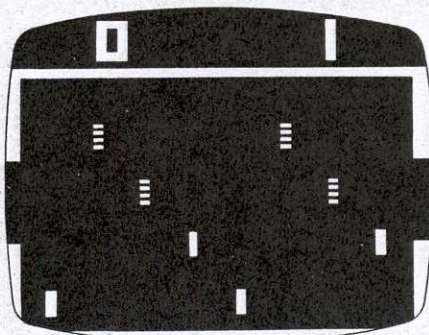
We decided to begin with Atari for two main reasons. First, Atari helped start it all by introducing Pong to the arcades, and second, the unit has been available in its present form longer than most of its competitors.

The Atari console is an attractive unit with simple slide switches to turn the machine on and off, select the desired program from the cartridge in use, start play, and adjust difficulty. A two-position difficulty switch allows for "expert" level play and handicapping to even competition.

The game comes with one pair each of joystick and paddle-type controllers. Some of Atari's newer car-

tridge offerings require keyboard controllers, available separately, and the Indy 500 game cartridge employs special steering controllers packed with the cartridge itself.

The game, including the two sets of controllers and the Combat game cartridge, lists for \$199.95. Cartridges carry a list price of \$19.95, except for Indy 500, which retails for \$39.95.



Video Olympics

With that out of the way, let's get to some of the more interesting cartridges:

VIDEO OLYMPICS (CX2621) takes Atari's Pong concept and explores it to the limit. There's **Robot Pong**, an astonishingly good solitaire version; **Super Pong**, which gives each player two paddles; and **Foozpong**, which has players guiding a vertical three-paddle column. All, of course, are in addition to the venerable father of video ball games, **Pong** itself.

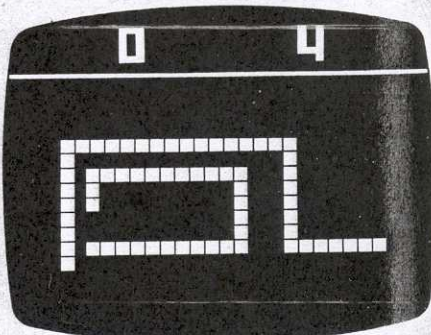
All two-player games have four-player versions when a second pair of

paddle controllers, which must be purchased separately, are added. Options include player-controlled speed and "whammy," which sharpens the angle on returns. **Hockey III** adds yet another dimension to play, the "catch" feature, which allows players to hold the puck before passing.

Volleyball literally turns Pong on its side. Paddles move horizontally across the bottom of the playfield, which is divided at its center by a net. Like the real sport, video Volleyball is even more fun with four players than with two. The game even permits "spiking," always a good move when your opponent is returning a volley from near the backline.

In **Handball**, the inactive player is, unhappily, indicated by a blinking paddle. We found this less satisfactory than just having the paddle disappear when it is not used. Atari's method adds lots of penalty points for interference, but little else.

There is also a **Basketball** game on Video Olympics, but it's primitive



Surround

compared to Atari's own CX2624 cartridge. Finally, if all these variations still aren't enough, the cartridge includes **Quadrapong**. This ultimate permutation of the Pong idea boasts a four-player, four-wall format that is superb for group play.

Players of **SURROUND** (CX2641) use the joystick to steer a small square across an otherwise blank field. The square generates a line in its wake, and the object is to keep your line growing. This is accomplished by avoiding any intersection with the playfield boundary, your

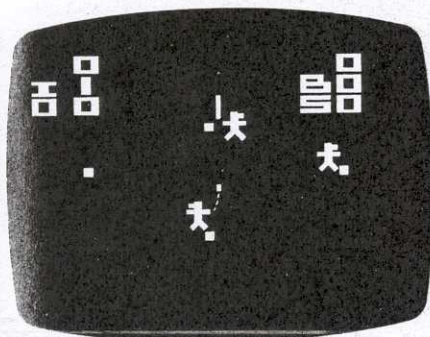
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opponent's line, or your own. The "head" of each line moves constantly, picking up speed during the course of a round.

The game can be enjoyed solitaire (variation #4 is best), but this does more to develop steering proficiency than overall strategy; the computer just tries to avoid mistakes and doesn't play as aggressively as a "live" foe. Variation #6, which includes diagonal movement, makes the best tournament game and has an elegance of design that promotes frequent replay.

Despite the name "Surround," an encircling strategy may not be the most effective approach. Good players pre-empt as much of the playfield area as possible, forcing rivals to make more, and tighter, turns. At frenetic late-round speeds, those hairpin curves become nearly impossible to negotiate.

HOME RUN (CX2623) presents the National Pastime in one- and two-



Home Run

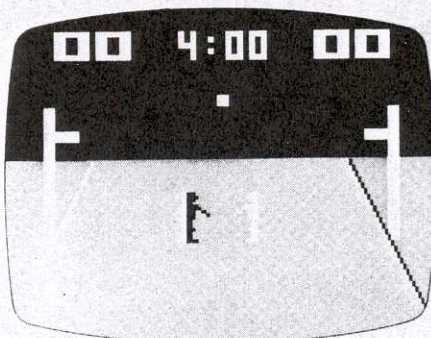
player versions. Unlike other video baseball programs, action is almost exclusively confined to the infield. The basic game features a stationary batter, a catcher, and a pitcher (who becomes a fielder once the batter connects), and variations add one or two more fielders.

As in real baseball, pitching is 90 percent of the contest. Home Run can turn you into a regular Sandy Koufax, complete with singing curve, blazing fastball, and deceptive change-up. You can even hurl an authentic screwball if the spirit moves you.

Beginners should concentrate on

either pitching or fielding and leave development of a good all-around game for later. It always takes players a split second to regain control of fielders after carefully guiding in a pitch, so it's hard to get a good jump on the ball if you're bearing down on the hurling.

Since the program for Home Run isn't quite as complicated as some other game programs offered by other companies, the computer can give you a real run for your money



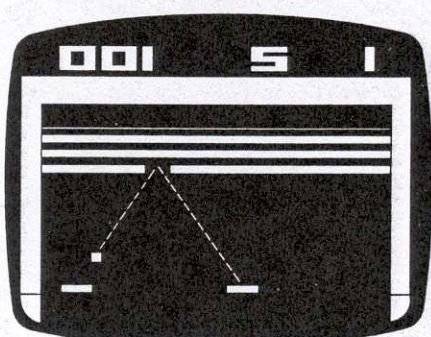
Basketball

of one-on-one hoop action we've seen so far. An unusual graphic design produces a fan's-eye perspective of the court, greatly enhancing visual appeal.

The game definitely captures the flavor of basketball. The shooting procedure permits a choice among three ball trajectories, and the program also includes such niceties as stealing the ball, rebounding, and blocking shots.

Basketball is that rare game that plays well solitaire or with a human opponent. Although the computer sloughs off on defense when it's in the lead, it becomes a tenacious ballhawk and deadly shooter in close tilts. Beginners are advised to handicap the robot player using the difficulty switch or risk getting pounded into the hardwood.

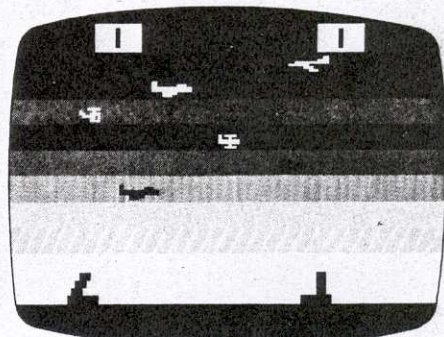
Stealing the ball is the most important aspect of the two-player version. Shot blocking, though effective at times, takes the defender out of the play when it doesn't work. Use it



Breakout

when you play solitaire. The robot fielders always concede first base to the batter, even when there is no one on, and this can prove a bit disconcerting. Since the machine is only interested in making a force out at second, the sacrifice is a useless tactic. The machine handles anything hit up the middle like a golden glove, so the home run—a liner over second that leaves the playfield—is something of a rarity.

BASKETBALL (CX2624) is sure to delight electronic sports game fans. It offers the most exciting four minutes



Air-Sea Battle

sparingly.

BREAKOUT (CX2622) is reputedly the second-highest dollar grosser in commercial arcades, and the home cartridge is a must. It's greatly enlivened by full-color graphics and a slew of speed and angle changes.

All variations share the same principle—the player hits a ball against a seven-tiered wall with his horizontally moving paddle. The ball removes one brick at a time in **Breakout**; in **Breakthru** it clears a path through the whole wall, bounces off

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the rear of the playfield, and plows into the bricks again on the return.

Breakout success hinges on learning to anticipate the speed and the carom of the ball. Novices often try to dismantle a Breakout wall one brick at a time, but forging a tunnel through the entire wall works better. Once a ball passes through this "breakout" it will hit bricks from behind and ricochet to the back wall instead of toward the paddle. This removes the high-scoring rear rows with little additional effort. A breakthrough at an edge is better than one near the center, because it increases the chance that a ball will rattle around back there for a longer time.

Breakthru, though a little less challenging, is an addiction (grumps in seventeen states want to make it a felony). It's great for tournaments, since a three-out-of-five series takes only minutes, but it's first-rate played solitaire as well. A good feature is that a second wall appears once the player demolishes the first one.

AIR-SEA BATTLE (CX2602) is the ultimate game for people who enjoy blowing things up. **Anti-aircraft** lets players fire stationary ack-ack guns with variable gun angle, while **Torpedo** allows combatants to move their vertically firing submarines back and forth across the bottom of the playfield. **Shooting Gallery** combines both variables in one game featuring appropriate targets.

These games, as well as **Bomber** (planes firing at subs) and **Polaris** (subs shooting at planes), give a choice of straight or guided missiles. It may take a little practice, but the steerable missiles yield a more exciting, fast-paced game. Game #11, **Torpedo**, with guided missiles and blocking airborne objects, is our personal favorite. Addiction to this one is common and may produce an irresistible urge to superimpose the playfield over *The Tonight Show* and commence firing at Zsa Zsa Gabor.

The only real problem with this cartridge is the computer's inability to handle the guided missile option during solitaire play. We recommend **Torpedo** (#11), normally a two-player game, if you're all alone and just *have* to steer some missiles.

Obviously, these are only a half-dozen of the score of cartridges currently available from Atari. This column will eventually give some of these cartridges their deferred justice once products of other manufacturers have had their innings.